

November 3, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

U.S. Department of Education
Office of the Executive Secretariat
FOIA Service Center
400 Maryland Ave. SW, LBJ 7W106A
Washington, D.C. 20202-4536
EDFOIAManager@ed.gov
ATTN: FOIA Public Liaison

Re: FOIA REQUEST: Records Pertaining to Communications Between Federal Student Aid and the 2023 Negotiated Rulemaking Student Loan Debt Relief Committee
(DFI FOIA Request 100-10-23)

Dear FOIA Public Liaison:

The Defense of Freedom Institute for Policy Studies (“DFI”) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to defending and advancing freedom and opportunity for every American family, student, entrepreneur, and worker and to protecting civil and constitutional rights at schools and in the workplace. DFI includes former U.S. Department of Education (“Department” or “ED”) and other federal agency officials who are experts in education law and policy and the operation of the Department. For the benefit of the public, DFI’s mission includes obtaining records related to the consideration and implementation of policies imposed by the federal government and its officials on the American people.

The U.S. Department of Education’s (“ED”) Office of Postsecondary Education (“OPE”) published a notice¹ announcing its intent to “establish a negotiated rulemaking committee to prepare proposed regulations for the Federal Student Aid programs authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 [(“HEA”)].”² The committee was to include “representatives of organizations or groups with interests that are significantly affected” by proposed regulations pertaining to “the authorities granted to the Secretary in HEA Section 432(a), which relate to the modification, waiver, or compromise of Federal student loans.”³

Primary negotiators and alternates were selected by the Department to serve on the “2023 Negotiated Rulemaking Student Loan Debt Relief Committee [(“Committee”)]”.⁴ The Committee will conduct three sessions “to develop proposed regulations” concerning student loan forgiveness.

¹ See Negotiated Rulemaking Committee; Public Hearing, 88 Fed. Reg. 43069 (Jul. 6, 2023), <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2023-14329>.

² *Id.* at ¶ 3.

³ *Id.* at ¶ 11.

⁴ *Id.* at ¶ 10.



The Committee’s goal was to obtain consensus on proposed regulations concerning the Secretary of Education’s authority under the HEA to modify, waive, release, or compromise Federal student loans pursuant to “section 432(a) of the HEA, [and] different sections in 34 CFR parts 30, 682, and 685.”⁵

The makeup of the current committee, which predominantly consists of student loan borrowers and other proponents of student loan forgiveness, gives an unfair advantage to borrowers while ignoring the interests of taxpayers who did not amass student debt or never went to college. Because the membership completely aligns with ED’s policies, ED is acting in a manner that is contrary to one of the main purposes of negotiated rulemaking – offering balanced representation of groups that will be significantly impacted by the proposed regulations.

DFI and the public have an interest in knowing the activities and communications related to the Department of Education’s 2023 Negotiated Rulemaking Student Loan Debt Relief Committee.

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 *et seq.* and the implementing regulations of ED, 34 C.F.R. Part 5 (“Availability of Information to the Public”), DFI makes the following requests for provision of records within your possession and/or control:

Requested Records

DFI requests that ED produce the following records within twenty (20) business days as required by statute:

1. All communications, including but not limited to electronic mail (“email”), email attachments, texts, letters, memoranda, calendar invitations, calendar entries, training materials, and other documentation between the Federal Student Aid (“FSA Custodians” *infra*) and the following individuals and organizations since January 20, 2021, through the date the search was conducted:
 - a. Cynthia Jeffries
 - b. John Weathers
 - c. Brady Roberts
 - d. Mike Franczak
 - e. Wisdom Cole
 - f. India Heckstall
 - g. Kyra Taylor
 - h. Scott Waterman
 - i. Lane Thompson
 - j. Amber Gallup
 - k. State Attorney General Yael Shavit, Office of the Massachusetts Attorney General
 - l. Josh Divine, Missouri Attorney General’s Office
 - m. Melissa Kunes

⁵ *Id.*



- n. J.D. LaRock
- o. Angelika Williams
- p. Susan Teerink
- q. Kathleen Dwyer
- r. Belen Gonzalez
- s. Sandra Boham
- t. Carol Peterson
- u. Scott Buchanan
- v. Benjamin Lee
- w. Ashley Pizzuti
- x. David Ramirez
- y. Sherrie Gammage
- z. Sarah Christa Butts
- aa. Richard Haase
- bb. Dr. Jalil Bishop
- cc. Jada Sanford
- dd. Jordan Nellums
- ee. Vincent Andrews
- ff. Jessica Ranucci
- gg. Ed Boltz
- hh. John Whitelaw
- ii. Waukecha Wilkerson
- jj. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- kk. Center for Law and Social Policy
- ll. National Consumer Law Center
- mm. Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services - Division of Financial Regulation (DCBS)
- nn. New Mexico Higher Education Department
- oo. Student Loan Servicing Alliance
- pp. Ascendium Education Solutions, Inc.
- qq. Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. (CLASI)
- rr. New York Legal Assistance Group:
- ss. Law Offices of John T. Orcutt, P.C.

FSA Custodians

The search for records described in Item 1 should be limited to the following officials within the Office of Federal Student Aid:

1. Chief Operating Officer, Federal Student Aid
2. Principal Deputy Chief Operating Officer, Federal Student Aid
3. Deputy Chief Operating Officer, Federal Student Aid
4. Chief Enforcement Officer, Federal Student Aid
5. Chief of Staff, Federal Student Aid
6. Director, Office of Partner Participation and Oversight, Federal Student Aid



7. Any employee assigned to the Investigations Group, Partner Enforcement and Consumer Protection Directorate, Office of Partner Participation and Oversight, Federal Student Aid
8. Any FSA employees to the Borrower Defense Group, Partner Enforcement and Consumer Protection Directorate, Office of Partner Participation and Oversight, Federal Student Aid

Statutory Disclosure Requirements

FOIA imposes a burden on ED, as a covered agency under 5 U.S.C. § 551(1), to timely disclose requested agency records to the requestor⁶ if ED (1) created or obtained the requested materials, and, (2) is “in control of the requested materials at the time the FOIA request [was] made.”⁷ Upon request, ED must “promptly” make the requested records available to the requester.⁸ Notably, covered agency records include materials provided to ED by both private and governmental organizations.⁹ Upon receipt of a FOIA request that “reasonably” describes the records sought and is in compliance with ED’s published rules regarding the time, place, any fees, and procedures to be followed,¹⁰ ED must conduct a search calculated to find responsive records in ED’s control at the time of the request.¹¹ In addition, the records produced by ED are required to be provided in “any form or format requested . . . if the record is readily reproducible by the agency in that form or format.”¹²

Upon receipt of this request, ED has **twenty business days** to “determine . . . whether to comply with [the] request” and “shall immediately notify” the requester of its determination and the reasons therefore,” the right to seek assistance from the agency’s FOIA public liaison, and the requester’s right to appeal any “adverse determination” by ED.¹³

Consistent with FOIA guidelines, DFI requests the following regarding the provision of the requested records:

- ED should immediately act to protect and preserve all records potentially responsive to this request, notifying any and all responsible officials of this preservation request and verifying full compliance with the preservation request.

⁶ FOIA requires the disclosure of nonexempt agency records to any person, which includes an individual, partnership, corporation, association, or public or private organization other than an agency. 5 U.S.C. § 551(2).

⁷ *Department of Justice (DOJ) v. Tax Analysts*, 492 U.S. 136 at 144–45 (1989).

⁸ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(A).

⁹ *Id.* at 144.

¹⁰ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(A)(i).

¹¹ *Wilbur v. C.I.A.*, 355 F.3d 675, 678 (D.C. Cir. 2004).

¹² 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B).

¹³ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i).



This matter may be subject to litigation, making the immediate initiation of a litigation hold on the requested materials necessary.

- ED should timely provide entire records responsive to this request, broadly construing what information may constitute a “record” and avoid unnecessarily omitting portions of potentially responsive records as they may provide important context for the requested records.
- ED should narrowly construe and precisely identify the statutory basis for any constraint which it believes may prevent disclosure.
- If ED determines that any portions of otherwise responsive records are statutorily exempt from disclosure, DFI requests that ED disclose reasonably segregable portions of the records.
- For any responsive records withheld in whole or part, ED should provide a clear and precise enumeration of those records in index form presented with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA”¹⁴ and provide a sufficiently detailed justification and rationale for each non-disclosure and the statutory exemption upon which the non-disclosure relies.
- Please provide responsive records in electronic format by email, native format by mail, or PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. If it helps speed production and eases ED’s administrative burden, DFI welcomes provision of the records on a rolling basis. Responsive records sent by mail should be addressed to the Defense of Freedom Institute for Policy Studies, 1455 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20004.

Fee Waiver Request

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 34 C.F.R. § 5.33 and 34 C.F.R. § 5.32(b)(1)(ii), DFI requests a waiver of all fees associated with this FOIA request for agency records. Indeed, the Department recognizes that DFI is entitled to a fee waiver under the applicable authorities: on February 22, 2022, the Department granted DFI’s request for a fee waiver. Please refer to the Department’s correspondence dated February 22, 2022, from Tracey St. Pierre, Chief FOIA Officer, to DFI’s counsel.

Disclosure of the requested records is in the public interest.

Disclosure of the requested records is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and because disclosure of the information contained within the requested records is not primarily in the

¹⁴ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).



commercial interests of DFI.

The disclosed materials are likely to contribute significant information to the public's understanding of ED's authority under the HEA to modify, waive, release, or compromise Federal student loans, conduct negotiated rulemaking, and otherwise amend significant sections of the HEA. These are issues which are of significant interest to American students, families, teachers, and taxpayers across the country who are affected by changes to the Federal Student Loan program.

This information does not otherwise appear to be in the public domain (in duplicative or substantially identical form).

Provision of the requested records will not commercially benefit DFI (a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization interested in the transparency of ED operations and governance) but will benefit the general public and other groups and entities with non-commercial interests in ED's operations and governance.

DFI will review and analyze the requested records and make the records and analyses available to the general public and other interested groups through publication on DFI's website and social media platforms such as Facebook and X, formerly known as Twitter (distribution functions it has already demonstrated a capacity to provide since its formation in September 2021, including a detailed news story on ED policies widely distributed by one of the nation's largest news providers in February 2022, a March 2022 analysis of DOJ policies distributed by a leading news magazine, and multiple widely published analyses and news stories involving recent ED policy announcements regarding the student loan repayment program and Title IX proposed rulemaking). DFI personnel also frequently offer commentary and analyses on radio and television news programs and in various public forums.

Federal law makes clear that when the disclosure is in the public interest and the information contained within the disclosed records is not primarily in the commercial interests of the requester (here, DFI), statutory fee waiver is appropriate.

DFI is a representative of the news media.

In addition to the fee waiver request based upon the public interest, DFI also requests a fee waiver on the basis that DFI is a **representative of the news media**, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 34 C.F.R. § 5.32(b)(1)(ii).

FOIA (as amended) provides that a representative of the news media is "any person or entity that gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw materials into a distinct work, and distributes that to an audience."¹⁵ DFI provides exactly this service to the general public and other audiences with an interest in those materials and analyses. Upon receipt of the requested materials from ED, DFI will review and analyze those

¹⁵ See *Cause of Action v. FTC*, 799 F.3d 1108, at 1115–16 (D.C. Cir. 2015).



materials and will extract and otherwise distill particularly useful information from those materials for the benefit of the general public and other interested audiences.

DFI will provide its analyses to the general public and other interested audiences through publication on DFI's website and social media platforms such as Facebook and X (distribution functions it has already demonstrated a capacity to provide since its formation in September 2021). DFI personnel also frequently appear as guests or panelists to offer commentary and analysis on radio and television news programs and in various other public forums.

As a qualified non-commercial public education and news media requester with demonstrated ability to review and analyze publicly available information and to provide insight regarding that information, DFI is thus entitled to a fee waiver under FOIA as a representative of the news media.

Conclusion

The subject of this request regards the Department of Education's solicitation for nominations of negotiators to the rulemaking committee, responsible for reviewing and providing comments to proposed regulations concerning the Federal Student Aid programs authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The Department's ability to select the representatives to serve on the committee, especially those who are involved with voting for consensus on proposed regulations, is highly relevant to the interests of American students, families, teachers, and taxpayers. The requested records concern a matter that has been statutorily entrusted to the Secretary and are worthy of transparency in service of the public's right to know.

DFI appreciates ED's prompt attention to this request for records pursuant to FOIA, which will provide important information to the American people regarding the materials received by ED in response to its solicitation for negotiators to and all nominations ED received for the current rulemaking.

Please contact me immediately if DFI's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full.

If you have any questions or I can further clarify DFI's request, please contact me at your earliest convenience at martha.astor@dfipolicy.org or (321) 390-2707.

Sincerely,

Martha Astor
Associate Counsel
Defense of Freedom Institute
for Policy Studies, Inc.